

SUMMARY OF BOARD ITEM

ITEM # 03-6-4: PUBLIC HEARING TO CONSIDER A REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE ON ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS IN CALIFORNIA'S PORTABLE CLASSROOMS

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Informational item. Staff recommends that the Board concur with the recommendations contained in the joint Air Resources Board (ARB)-Department of Health Services (DHS) Report to the Legislature on Environmental Health Conditions in California's Portable Classrooms (Report), to take various actions to address unhealthful environmental conditions in schools.

DISCUSSION: In the Fiscal Year 2000-2001 budget, the amount of \$1 million was allocated for a joint ARB-DHS study (study) of the environmental health conditions present in California's portable classrooms. The study was mandated in response to concerns expressed by a number of groups that there may be insufficient ventilation, excess formaldehyde, mold, and other potential environmental problems in portable classrooms. After the study was completed, a report to the Legislature, including recommendations developed in consultation with interested stakeholders to address any problems found in the study, was required.

The study was conducted in two phases. First, questionnaires were mailed to teachers and facility managers at over 1,000 schools statewide. Second, detailed on-site measurements of a variety of environmental factors were made in 201 classrooms at 67 schools statewide. Public workshops and meetings with key state agencies were held before and after the study was completed. Staff also met individually with school district personnel and portable classroom manufacturers.

The study found that both portable and traditional (site-built) classrooms in California public schools have environmental conditions that should be addressed. Some of the findings include:

inadequate outdoor air ventilation and poor system maintenance in many classrooms; temperature and humidity levels outside the acceptable range in some classrooms; indoor levels of formaldehyde exceeding Office of Environmental Health Hazard's guideline levels and the one-in-a-million cancer risk level in nearly all classrooms; elevated levels of lead and arsenic in the floor dust in some classrooms; residues of numerous pesticides in the floor dust of many classrooms; visible mold or evidence of moisture problems (water stains) in about one-fourth of the classrooms; background noise above current guideline levels in all classrooms; and, inadequate lighting in some classrooms. Most, but not all, of these conditions were found more often in portable classrooms than in traditional classrooms.

A number of recommendations are provided in the Report to help guide resolution of the problems identified. In particular, ARB and DHS recommend that school districts assure that school buildings fully meet all state regulations, especially those of Cal-OSHA related to ventilation, sanitation, and moisture intrusion; that schools undertake a facility self-inspection process similar to that of the Los Angeles Unified School District; and that the State establish a policy of incorporating "Best Practices" into the design, construction, operation, and maintenance of schools. Additionally, long-term, stable funding mechanisms need to be developed for operation, maintenance, and repair of school buildings; state review of school plans and training programs need to be increased; and state-level guidelines or standards for chemical exposure and noise levels in classrooms need to be developed.

SUMMARY AND IMPACTS:

The results of this study indicate that the environmental conditions in some California classrooms are not conducive to the learning process, and may have adverse impacts on occupants' health. A variety of actions are needed to remedy and prevent the problems identified, both at the school and school district level and at the state level. Recommendations have been separated into three groups to facilitate the implementation of those that are most urgent and

can be accomplished at the least expense for most schools, and to identify actions needed to assure healthful conditions in California schools in the future.

